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## AT&T chairman urges open devices, platforms and networks globally

Stephenson even chides partner Apple for not being more open

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BARCELONA -- In a keynote address at the Mobile World Congress here, AT&T Chairman Randall Stephenson today prodded carriers, manufacturers and regulators around the globe to create openness and interoperability in mobile devices, platforms and networks.

His remarks even included some polite digs at Apple for requiring iTunes songs and App Store apps to run on Apple devices.

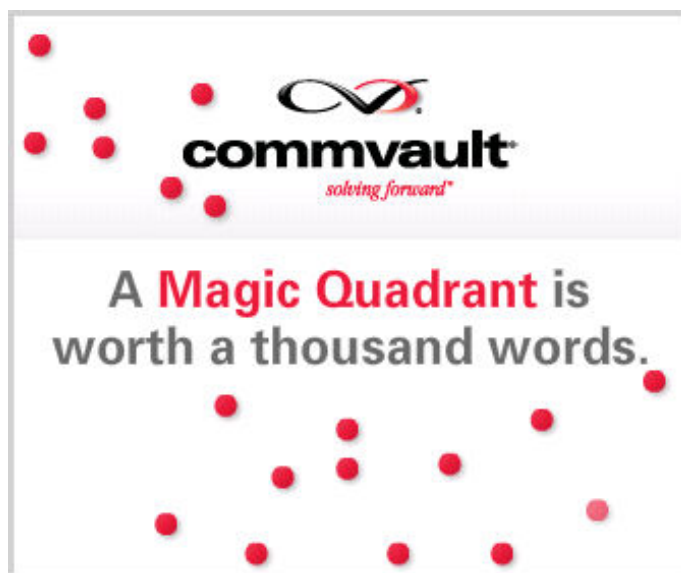
Speaking to a global audience, Stephenson said wireless smartphones and tablets need to be able to operate across countries and geographies in what is known as "spectrum harmony." He noted that a lack of international interoperability is currently a major obstacle for wireless telecommunications.

"AT&T is committed to the world's most advanced network, and we want it the most open and highly available and easily addressable," Stephenson said. "Cloud [computing] will be the catalyst ... and all operators are pursuing that same path. It's consistent across all geographies, but there are significant public policy issues to pursue."

Giving people the ability to play the coming avalanche of videos on all kinds of wireless devices and no matter what network they're using "is going to be everything," he said, arguing that public regulators in the U.S. and elsewhere need to find the "highest and best use" when allocating licenses to private carriers for wireless spectrum.

Regulators need to be "aggressive about getting spectrum into the right hands, and policies have to harmonize across geographies," he added.

"If our object is to grow the [wireless] pie, interoperability is necessary," he said. AT&T will begin rolling out a 4G wireless technology known as LTE across the 700 MHz band in the U.S. in mid-2011, he said. "Spectrum is going to play a huge role [globally], especially as we move to 4G. It's most important that regulators have to be aware of this if we want to create interoperability across



geographies and countries."

U.S.-based wireless users of most tablets and smartphones aren't able to easily connect to European and Asian 4G cellular networks, at least without expensive roaming costs.

Stephenson was joined in the crowded keynote session by several executives from carriers around the globe who also issued calls for openness. Some said there is a need to eliminate "walled gardens" -- a phrase that's generally used to refer to the situation that arises when carriers or others limit the number of sites that wireless users can visit on the Web.

Wang Jianzhou, chairman of China Mobile, also touched on the theme of keeping networks and devices open, noting that his company has pursued interoperability with carriers in Japan and South Korea.

Stephenson picked up on those sentiments adding: "Chairman Wang said it best, that customers don't seem to care about network access ... or whether it is Wi-Fi or 4G. The customer expectation for an open and seamless [wireless] environment will only increase and the more we facilitate that openness, [the better]."

Stephenson added there was a lesson to be learned from text messaging, which was once was not possible from one carrier's network to another's in the U.S. "Text messaging was a closed wall, and ultimately we created interoperability and the demand for text just skyrocketed," he said. "An open and interoperable environment ... will drive mobile broadband, and mobile broadband with the cloud will drive the next wave."

There were about 26 million text users in the U.S. in 2001, and that figure more than doubled to 58 million by 2009 after it became possible to text across carriers' networks, Stephenson noted.

He called the Amazon Kindle e-reader a good example of interoperability in action, noting that a user can read an Amazon e-book on a Kindle and on other devices, including Android smartphones and iPads. "The customer experience is agnostic," he noted. "It's a perfect example of how the mobile Internet and cloud computing are going to be powerful over time."

Stephenson's comment on the Kindle's interoperability was considered ironic, since AT&T had a deal with Apple to be the exclusive U.S. carrier to sell iPhones for nearly four years before Verizon Wireless [began selling](#) the [iPhone](#) 4 last week.

In fact, Stephenson mildly took [Apple](#) to task for requiring paid iTunes music downloads and App Store apps to run on Apple products. Noting that the songs people buy on iTunes are currently "Apple OS- and device-dependent," he said, "but we'll see [marketing and financial] models less dependent on the device" in the future. He didn't suggest any specific examples, however.

Regarding video downloads, Stephenson said that half of tablets and laptops today are streaming video content in the U.S. but customers can't easily port those videos from one device to another, and they incur some expense if they do.

"Buy-once and run-anywhere [video] is slow to emerge," he said. "We in the [wireless] ecosystem have to come to grips with this. Buying an app on one OS and buying it again on a second or third [OS], that's not how customers expect to experience this world."

He added: "A tidal wave is coming with 4G and [cloud](#) computing and... customers are going to do what they want. Our objective is to make this seamless and open as possible."

**Matt Hamblen** covers mobile and wireless, smartphones and other handhelds, and wireless networking for Computerworld. Follow Matt on Twitter at [@matthamblen](#), or subscribe to [Matt's RSS feed](#). His e-mail address is [mhamblen@computerworld.com](mailto:mhamblen@computerworld.com).